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Abstract

Kent Monkman is a First Nations artist who employs a number of strategies that I term quee(re)appropriations. Quee(re)appropriations are a specific form of reappropriation, a form that challenges the heteronormativity of dominant hegemony and highlights the confrontational and direct nature of the reclamation in the form of re-appropriation. Queer, here an adjective, describes practices that explicitly create alternatives to dominant culture. Historically, appropriation, seizure and confiscation have been used by conquerors as tools of empire, often through the field of anthropology under the guise of documentation and preservation. The seemingly documentarian collection of indigenous images and culture, selectively appropriated by colonial powers, have been used to justify a hierarchical power structure that led to expansion, relocation and genocide. Monkman uses quee(re)appropriation, or the queer re-appropriation of images previously appropriated by colonial powers, to shift the power structure and challenge hegemony. Quee(re)appropriations enable Monkman to make his own sovereign decolonial and two spirited artistic statements. All of Kent Monkman's work, as well as his biography, CV and more can be found on his website: kentmonkman.com.

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Quee(Re)Appropriations and Sovereign Art Statements in the Work of Kent Monkman

Susan Briana Livingston

Gleaming white phalluses pointing skyward against sublime panoramas, feather headdresses worn with beaded platform heels, arrow quivers emblazoned with the Luis Vuitton logo; this is the work of Kent Monkman (Figure 1). His work is amazingly varied in form, from videos and performances to epic paintings and sculptural objects, yet it is ideologically coherent, Monkman's work explores the layered power relationships between gender, sex, race, and colonialism. A First Nations Canadian artist of mixed Cree, Irish, and English heritage, Monkman's work suggests, "that history, as it pertains in any case to the constructed notions of aboriginal identity, is a largely subjective and arbitrary fabrication, no more valid or trustworthy than fiction" (Liss 2005:80).



Figure 1. *The Treason of Images* (2008) Kent Monkman Acrylic on Canvas (24"x30")
Source: Kent Monkman

In turn, his work is tremendously serious and bitingly ironic, with an eye towards camp and humor, illustrated with titles like, *The Triumph of Mischief* and *Bijoux Not Bear Claws*. Monkman says of his work, “I like to think that my work complicates the discourse about both contemporary and historical art, as well as first Nations art and identity” (Gooden 2009:82). His work points to “history as a mythology forged from relationships of power and subjugation” (Gooden 2009:82), elicited from eroticism, xenophobia, and morality. While Monkman, or rather his alter ego Miss Chief, struts in drag through performances entitled *Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle’s Traveling Gallery* and *European Male Emporium* (Liss 2005). His paintings of grand vistas mimic the by-gone landscapes of the Hudson River School, but subvert those works’ messages of Manifest Destiny, providing a sentient touchstone to the issues of power that Monkman explores. As Liss explains upon viewing Monkman’s work

Cowboys, Indians and soldiers appear engaged in the kinds of activities that most of us in North America were taught took place upon contact between the first settlers and aboriginals.... on closer scrutiny, however, it becomes clear that Monkman’s figures are engaged in encounters of an entirely different sort. (2005:79)

These encounters of a different sort include interracial sex, sodomy, and homosexual desire. McIntosh notes that

From his reworking of iconic Hudson School and Group of Seven landscape paintings, newly populated with porno-kitsch “cow-boy-and-indian” couplings, to his incarnation as Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle, an extreme-rez makeover of the artist as pop diva Cher, Monkman surfs our collective cultural pasts, repeating, inverting, queering and reusing them. (2006:13)

I suggest that Monkman’s work uses a type of quee(re)appropriation, or the queer re-appropriation of previously appropriated images, to shift the power structure and challenge hegemony, particularly the relationship between heterosexuality and colonial empire. Queer, here an adjective, describes practices that explicitly work against white capitalist heteropatriarchal colonial hegemony, creating clearly articulated alternatives to dominant culture, alternatives that serve as decolonial gestures and sovereign statements. Historically, appropriation, seizure, and confiscation have been used by conquerors as tools of empire, as Headrick’s (1981) has argued in his work on technology and imperialism. This has often been in the form of “scientific” or anthropological documentation that supposedly recorded and preserved people and their culture. However, the seemingly documentarian collection of aboriginal images and culture, selectively appropriated by colonial pow-

ers, have been used to justify a hierarchical power relationship that led to assimilation, relocation, and genocide.

Monkman uses strategies of quee(re)appropriation to challenge the historical power relationship established by those images, enacting both a sovereign and decolonizing image-making practice. Liss explains that “Monkman knows the canon well enough to be able to read between, around and through the narratives that we have come to accept as our heritage” (2005:80). However, that which we have accepted as our heritage is an ideological construction designed by colonial powers. This fiction becomes ripe for parody and pastiche in the hands of Monkman, an artist of Irish and Cree heritage.

Monkman’s quee(re)appropriations then allow him to make sovereign artistic statements about the contemporary lives of native people who have been colonized, but continue to productively resist complete assimilation. Sovereignty, while often understood through law and policy as the right to self govern, is also, according to Bunda (2007), an embodied identity, which is articulated through indigenous productions like literature and art. Bunda discusses the (re)emergence of the aboriginal sovereign woman in literature, noting that “Our sovereignty is embodied and is tied to particular tracts of country, thus our bodies signify ownership and we perform sovereign acts in our everyday living” (2007:75). Lyon, also looking at writing and the idea of rhetorical sovereignty, explains,

After years of colonization, oppression, and resistance, American Indians are making clear what they want from the heretofore compromised technology of writing. Rhetorical sovereignty, a people’s control of its meaning, is found in sites legal, aesthetic, and pedagogical, and composition studies can both contribute to and learn from this work. (2000:447)

A similar type of articulation has been occurring within fine arts. Many of the technologies of aesthetic production, like painting and photography, have been used by colonizers against native people and when not used explicitly as tools of empire, the Western world has defined the ways in which these artistic mediums should be used. A sovereign artistic statement is then an embodied native production that acts to either decolonize or challenge empire’s constraints on indigenous lives, including both the means and aesthetics styles of indigenous production. Monkman engages in sovereign art making through quee(re)appropriation. Liss notes that for all the sequins and kitsch, Monkman “makes us aware of the damaging effects of marginalization and oppression and of the multiplicity of stories and truths that need to be acknowledged and included in the dialogue” (2005:82). Parody and camp may seem light hearted, but when used by a master of quee(re)appropriation, “porno-kitsch” becomes a decolonial strategy. By using the empire’s own language, both visual and verbal, Monkman speaks back to power.

I argue that three of Monkman's most successful quee(re)appropriations are his paintings, which re-appropriate both literal and imagined spaces through the use of Hudson River School style landscapes, Monkman's drag performance as Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, which challenges both the grand narrative that erases American Indians and the imposition of European sexual binaries on the "New World." The classical Western dualistic split between male and female, combined with cisgenderism, or the assumption that one's biological sex matches their gender, silences a large spectrum of other gender performances and identities. Monkman's work engages in issues of authenticity and power in a postmodern era of rampant decontextualized appropriation, and his photographic depictions of himself as different Indian performers, which reclaim Indian image making back from the likes of Edward Curtis Edward and his famous Vanishing Race portfolio.

The Multivalence of Queer

In this paper, I define and use queer as both a verb and a noun. Firstly, Monkman is queer, here used as noun, insofar as he identifies himself as a Two Spirited person. According to O'Hara, "The word two spirited was coined during the Native lesbian and gay movement of the 1990s to establish a space for coalitions and activism" (2014: xxi). Driskill, et al., explain that Two Spirit

is an umbrella term in English that 1) refers to the gender construction and roles that occur historically in many Native gender systems that are outside the colonial binaries and 2) refers to contemporary Native people who are continuing and/or reclaiming these roles within their communities (2011:xxi)

More broadly it has also been applied lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (known in the United States under the acronym LGBTQ) Native peoples to incorporate an indigenous cultural understanding of gender and sexuality. As Roscoe notes, "The social universe of native North America was nowhere more at odds with that of Europe and Anglo-America than in its diverse gender roles" (2000:4). This was apparent in European reports of "*berdaches*"¹ a term anthropologists coined to refer to third and fourth gender people who were met by Europeans from the Spanish conquistadors onward "...with amazement, dismay, disgust, and occasionally, when they weren't dependent on the natives' good will, with violence" (Roscoe 2004:4).

1 I put "*berdache*" in quotes based on Jacob's and Thomas's work (1997), which notes that "*berdache*" is often considered insulting and inappropriate by contemporary Native Americans and anthropologists. Two Spirited is the more appropriate agreed upon term, but "*berdache*" has been historically used to describe certain types of ceremonial travesty. Therefore, I continue to use it, but in quotation.

Roscoe goes on to argue that “*berdaches*,” Two-Spirited individuals, or what we would perhaps now call transgender or gender queer individuals, were common, even respected, in many native societies. “The result,” he explains, “is a strikingly different view of the American frontier. Instead of hyper masculine braves and submissive squaws we find personalities of surprising diversity and complexity” (Roscoe 2004:4). Moreover, the lives of “*berdaches*” refute western social and medical ideas on sex and gender, as, “*Berdaches* were not failed men or women; they occupied distinct gender roles and behaved according to cultural expectations for those roles” (Roscoe 2000:5). Two Spiritedness often “...overlays conversations about Indigenous nationalism with representations of gender diversity” (Driskill, et al. 2011:166). Two Spirited-ness and what has been called a sovereign erotics, “...suggests that the project of ‘healing our sexualities’ cannot be separated from ‘ongoing processes of decolonialization’” (Driskill, et al. 2011:176). Thus two spirited describes an identity that is both linked to sexual and gender identity, as well as a commitment to Native knowledge and ways of being. Two Spirited is an identity that Monkman not only performs, as in his drag performance and his video piece *Dance to the Berdashe* (2008), but also Monkman self identifies as Two Spirited. With this in mind it is no wonder that, as De Blois explains

Monkman’s latest video installation is a response to the fifty-sixth letter of Catlin’s memoir in which he condemns the existence of the Berdashe, but also to one of his paintings called Dance to the Berdashe depicting a ceremony in honor of this singular character. As one would expect, far from disapproving of the Berdashe’s hybridity, Monkman’s work glorifies it. (2010:1)

It is easy to understand the noun queer in application to Monkman and his work. However, queer can also be a verb as it describes an analytical process that belongs to the discipline of Queer theory and addresses something broader than Gay and Lesbian studies (Giffney 2004). As Downson explains

Queer theory is very definitely not restricted to homosexual men and women, but to anyone who feels their position (sexual, intellectual, or cultural) to be marginalized . . . Queering . . . empowers us to think what is often the unthinkable to produce unthought-of- of pasts [presents and futures]. (Giffney 2004:73)

Many scholars have worried queer will be emptied, “...of its political valence and critical edge if it is moved outside of the lesbian and gay sphere” (Giffney 2004:73). However, opening queer to possibilities outside of lesbian and gay studies takes it outside of the realm of identity politics. Moreover, Giffney explains, “I understand queer theory to be, in Ruth Goldman’s words, ‘a theoretical perspective from which to challenge the normative’ (1996:170) – even

if that normative is itself” (2004:74). It is this use of queer, not singularly as an identity category or marker, but as a theoretical position from which to challenge normativity, even the normative assumption that queer must be about homosexual identity, that informs Glickman’s use of queer. Glickman explains that,

To queer something, whether it’s a text, a story, or an identity, is to take a look at its foundations and question them. We can explore its limits, its biases, and its boundaries. We can look for places where there’s elasticity or discover ways we can transform it into something new. To queer is to examine our assumptions and decide which of them we want to keep, change, discard, or play with. This becomes a practice in transcending the habit of settling for pre-defined categories and creating new ones. And even when we leave something unchanged, we have changed our relationship to it. (2012: para. 1)

Cober and Valochi note that “...queerness is...a relation between something perceived to be solid and stable and it’s destabilization into something else” (2003:25). It is to “...focus not on the identity of those labeled normal and those labeled abnormal, but on the oblique relation between two (or more) identities, positions or practices that have no certain or timeless definition or content” (Cober and Valochi 2003:25). Queer becomes a critical lens or tool to explore the ambiguous spaces between binaries, most obviously between hetero and homosexuality, but also between any set of practices that appear ideologically stable, but are in fact mobile, circulating, and carrying with them different meanings and power relationships. In relationship to Monkman, queer destabilizes not only the hetero/homo and male/female binaries through an opening up of a Two-Spirited space, but it also complicates the narrative binaries of colonizer/colonized, civilized/savage, and agent/victim. Two-Spiritedness may also seem to limit gender performance by confining it within a narrative binary. While the term came into common use in contemporary Indigenous and Gender studies in the 1990’s, the term itself is an older re-appropriation. *Berdache* is a term that like Two Spirited, was originally coined by the colonizers. However, Two Spirited has become the term which has been re-appropriated because of the problematic meaning of *berdache*, which in French means male prostitute (Epplé 1998) and was used by colonizers in a derogatory way.

In her discussion of contemporary depictions of Two Spirited identity, Tatonetti discuss a type of , “...Two-Spirit cosmology,” where relationships are, “...defined not just in terms of same-sex desire but also by a nonheterosexual desire that cannot be separated from understandings of indigeneity.” (2010:165). She continues, arguing that “...in the end, eroticism and indigeneity are linked” (2010:166) within Two Spiritedness. Similarly, Driskill ar-

gues that, “The term ‘Two-Spirit’ is a word that resists colonial definitions...” (2004:52). Two Spirit was “...never meant to create a monolithic understanding of the array of Native traditions regarding what dominant European and Euroamerican traditions call ‘alterative’ genders and sexualities” (2004:52). Two Spirited is analogous to the way in which queer is used contemporarily, as a multiplicity of identities and practices that resist the normative, particularly but not exclusively in regards to sexuality and gender. Two Spirited and Queer both destabilize with their intrinsic critique. McRuer (2006) has persuasively argued that queer and “crip” occupy a similar critical position in challenging the norm, one through a challenge to compulsory heteronormativity, the other through a challenge to compulsory able-bodiedness. Two Spirited challenges heteronormativity through and with indigeneity. I believe that Monkman’s Two Spirit work combines decolonial and sovereign practices with queer critique, all working towards the overall critical position of challenging hegemonic dominance, through re-appropriative acts.

Humorous, Sovereign and Decolonizing Re-Appropriations

Like queer, appropriation, or as I will argue re-appropriation, also has multiple meanings. Appropriate is defined as “to take or use (something) especially in a way that is illegal, unfair, etc. To take or make use of without authority of right” (Merriam Webster, 3rd ed., s.v. “appropriate”). There is a literal or physical appropriation of lands or objects, for example the taking of land from native peoples. This is most one of the more familiar uses of the word and is particularly attached to imperial projects that funneled resources in the form of goods, slave labor, and land from the hands of the colonized into the pockets of the colonizers. Maira looking at the rise of Indo-Chic in the United States, has noted a

...turn-of-the-millennium Orientalism, in Edward Said’s words, “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the occident’” (Said 1978:2) and situated in histories of colonization, economic penetration, and academic voyeurism. (2002:137-138)

While Maira may be interrogating the rise of henna, bindi and belly button rings; colonialist America applies a similarly Orientalist view to indigenous peoples’ images and productions. Similar exotic tropes and connections with barbarism, in America savagery, and a mythical land, here the fictional pristine forests that early travel writers linked to Natives, are used in a type of American Orientalism or what Wrobel (2006) calls an “imperial gaze.” Wrobel similarly cites Said and Orientalism in his study of American travel writing, noting that, “Travel writers have been commonly characterized as the ar-

chitects of imperial visions, the exoticizers, commodifiers, and objectifiers of colonized 'others' who helped their readers in the imperial mother countries to understand, accept, and consume the exercise of empire" (2006:431). Wrobel goes on to look at how travel writing has represented America and explains that, "The idea of benign national distinctiveness, of republican purity and innocence, has continually collided with the notion of the United States as an empire, much like other empires that have risen and fallen in the course of human history" (2006:432). Manifest Destiny, or the narrative of progress that argued that civilized man was destined by divine right to inherit, read take, the earth from those primitive enough to not understand its worth and potential, butted up against the perspective that America was engaged in the very human process of empire making. Wrobel notes that, "From the earliest settlements in British North America, colonists viewed the western frontier within a wider context of global exploration, commerce, and imperial war" (2006:432). Wrobel also explains that, "So long as the United States had a western frontier to move into, that process of expansion seemed ostensibly, and retrospectively, nonimperialistic" (2006:433). By the 19th century empire seemed antiquated, a piece of American history and no longer a description of current expansion, which involved fully formed states entering the union. However, imperialism describes the continued appropriation of Native lands through both Jeffersonian Civilization policy, which turned Natives into civilized Americans, putting land into the hands of proper Americans by making Indians proper, to Jacksonian Removal policy, which forcibly took Indian lands (Satz 1975; Wallace 1999).

However, there is also the symbolic or cultural appropriation of another people's customs, traditions, image, etc. While this form of appropriation is not as overt, it is harmfully stereotyped and continued today. Mithlo (2009) discusses this type of cultural appropriation in her book *Our Indian Princess*, where she addresses the harmful nature of fictionalized visual stereotypes like that of the Land O'Lakes®, particularly for Native female artists. This is something seen on a regular basis in the form of sports teams like The Red Skins or The Blackhawks or the University of Illinois' now officially defunct, but still idolized, mascot Chief Illiniwek. Charlene Teeters, who is credited with starting much of the protests against these racist mascots because of the frequent use of "war paint," feathers, and fake tomahawks at Illinois tail gating events said, "It was sacrilegious...They were culturally cross-dressing" (Rodriguez 1998:23). According to Rodriguez, "The mocking, as [Teeters] saw it, was akin to 'Black Sambo' or the 'Frito Bandito' – images that were done away with a generation ago" (1998:23).

While many of these more overt examples of racism, like Chief Illiniwek, have been changed by their schools, in large part because of pressure from sports organizations like the NCAA (National College Athletics Association), more subtle examples of cultural appropriation persist like Urban

Outfitters recent Navaho underwear line that featured vaguely geometric Native inspired prints (Sauers 2012). However, this appropriation isn't even a direct appropriation as Indians have not been the creators of Indian images, rather the stereotypes that these icons thrive on stems from Western depictions. Nichols explains that the Other, "rarely functions as a participant in and creator of a system of meaning ... hierarchy and control still fall on the side of the dominant culture that has fabricated the image of the Other in the first place" (Mithlo, 2009:23). Brody applies Nichol's observations about the Other to Native Americans, noting that, "the role of the Indian artist has been primarily that of a performer, working from a script written by Whites" (Mithlo 2009:49). Indian image and culture were appropriated so long ago and have been so essential to American myths of manifest destiny, as well as American expansion and exceptionalism, that the stereotypical Indian image is a production of the American imperial gaze.

With both the literal appropriation of lands and the cultural appropriation of images and artifacts as the predominant interaction between whites and indigenous people for the bulk of 18th and 19th century North American history, it is easy to see why contemporary indigenous artists are interested in the idea of reappropriation. Owens argues for an appropriative strategy, explaining that, "the only way to be really heard is to make them read on our terms, though within the language of the colonizer's terminology" (1998:7). Reclamation and re-appropriation are brought up in Bird and Harjo's *Reinventing the enemy's language* (1998), a series of poems and prose by indigenous women writers, who deal with ideas of cultural and personal loss. I find the idea of re-appropriation to make sense in the context of Monkman's work.

Reappropriation is the cultural process by which a group reclaims terms or artifacts that were previously used in a disparaging of that group. This is most obviously seen in the reappropriation of derogatory language. As Galinsky, et al., explain, "Derogatory labels express contempt and derision, and, as carriers of stigma, they represent mechanisms of social control that reinforce a group's disempowered state" (2013:2020). However, they go on to counter that "...self-labeling with a stigmatizing group label may facilitate *reappropriation*, the process of taking possession of a slur previously used exclusively by dominant groups to reinforce a stigmatized group's lesser status" (2013:2020). Critical to reappropriation is the shift in power. This is similar to the term reclamation. Godrej explains

To reclaim literally means to make one's own, to regain, retrieve, recover, repossess, salvage, or rescue. We reclaim terms, words, specific phrases, so that we refashion their meanings to correspond to our particular goals, we rescue or salvage them from their earlier, often derogatory, meanings we repossess them so

that we make them our own, so that their meanings have the authority of our ownership behind them. (2011:111)

Godrej goes on to explain that “...reclamation is usually a tool for disarming the power of a dominant group to control one’s own and others’ views of one-self.” (2011:111). Reclamation and reappropriation cover similar ground, as Mithlo points out in her article *Reappropriating Redskin*. Mithlo discusses the 2003 Venice Biennale and the Indigenous Arts Action Alliance’s exhibit there, entitled *Pellerossasogna*, or Red Skin Dream. She argues that much native image making is devoted to addressing misconceptions promoted by mainstream media, which “overlooks alternative strategies of representation that utilize humor, reappropriation, and self-conscious camp as expressive forms of self-identity” (2004:24). By re-appropriating the term redskin, the Indigenous Arts Action Alliance parodies other’s use of the term in a derogatory manner, establishing indigenous sovereignty over use of the term. Strategies of humor, camp and reappropriation appear repeatedly in native artists. Ryan discusses the many uses of humor and re-appropriation as postmodern indigenous art making strategies (1992).

Morris notes that many Indian artists have re-appropriated their own image and, “... have parodied the image or employed it to subvert colonialist tropes of power and representation” (2011:575). Decolonial resistance and empowerment coalesces in the artistic strategy of reappropriation making reappropriation an important tool for decolonization and sovereignty. Henzi explains that, “Reappropriation, then, is not only about resisting past and present forms of colonization; it is also about restoring traditional knowledge and attempting to harmonize it with present-day societal preoccupations” (2013:11). Reappropriation can be a decolonizing gesture about taking back what was stolen and decontextualized by colonialists, and putting it to work for the people who exist as contemporary inheritors of those losses. Reappropriation is particularly important to contemporary conversations about sovereignty as it offers a number of strategies for contemporary indigenous people to both return to a time before colonization, but also as a way to envision a future that is predicated on that past and sidesteps the assimilationist colonial narratives.

Kent Monkman and Queering Re-Appropriation

Quee(re)-appropriation is a type of reappropriation that specifically challenges the norm. The normative and hegemonic are constructed by and for the colonial capitalist hetero-white patriarchy, which have appropriated indigenous land and culture, reformulated them into an image of the noble savage, an image that is always already in the past and vanishing. A quee(re) appropriation then challenges that construction of Indians as vanishing and perpetually in the past. It challenges the ownership of lands, both psychi-

cally and physically. It challenges the importation of Western gender binaries and their violent application to Native peoples. Kent Monkman's work queers through its reappropriations and through those specific reappropriations, challenges ownership, authenticity, the historicizing impulse of sentimentality, and Western gender and sexual practices. Monkman's alternative history/fantasy paintings depict Indians as violent victors who chase partially dressed cowboys with murderous intent, freeze dying erect ranch hands in the artist's gaze, and sodomize cowpokes on the prairie while Bison stare on voyeuristically. Monkman's aggressive quee(re)appropriation of previously appropriated images, spaces, and cultural markers re-contextualizes them and re-orders the hierarchy upon which their original appropriation was founded. The following sections look specifically at Monkman's productions, specifically a selection of his paintings, performances, and photographs and how his work uses the strategy of quee(re)appropriation.

McIntosh argues that, "At first glance, Monkman might appear only as a highly accomplished mimic of bygone painterly and personal styles, as a fashionista of everything faux in the most vulgar sense of postmodern pastiche, parody and time" (2006:13). He goes on to explain that Monkman is that, but more since,

Mimicry is simply the fragile, familiar surface of Monkman's work. While he assumes the position of master in the colonial days, asserting his post-Indian diva warrior self as a determining presence, he exceeds simple role reversal and simulation, by constructing eloquently disjunctive palimpsests that breaks open to reveal new seems of meaning (2006:13).

Some of Monkman's most iconic works and pieces that engage most explicitly with both quee(re)appropriation and what might be called parody based mimicry are his paintings. Most are large scale, measuring upwards of six by nine feet, and are acrylic. As McIntosh (2006) notes, at first the paintings seem to be exquisite copies of the Hudson River School Style. However, within these awe-filled visions of nature when one looks carefully, one finds queer acts abounding as cowboys are sexually mounted by Indians, while Native men frolic with land surveyors and photographers in erotically charged scenes. These images are appropriations of two traditions: American landscape painting from the Hudson River and Rocky Mountain Schools and the works of the famous painter of Indians, George Catlin. Through the use of these stylistic and genre appropriations, Monkman re-appropriates both Native image and image making, as well as a type of psychic re-appropriation of what were once Native lands that were stripped from Native hands.

To understand the mechanics of Monkman's re-appropriative strategies it is necessary to understand the logics of early American landscape paintings. Sage (2008) explains that both the Hudson River School, primary lo-

cated in Eastern America and represented by artists like Thomas Cole (1801-1848) and Edwin Church (1826-1900), and the slightly later Rocky Mountain School, located further towards the West coast and represented by artists like Thomas Moran (1837-1926) and Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902). Both schools used strategies that have been called “the American sublime.” The sublime had long been debated by philosophers and was most often associated with nearly inexpressible feelings of awe, wonder and divine omnipotence. Sage argues that the American sublime “unfolded through a kind of emotionally charged, transcendental resonance between God as the supreme moral and omnipotent being, the absolute moral ideals of the individual and an indiscernible experience of the vastness and immensity of nature” (2008:28). This strong link between nature and God and the mastery of nature as part of manifest destiny was seen in some of the stylistic tropes of these artists, where “...the spread of light over darkness accompanied the civilizing passage of Christian pastoral culture into wilderness” (Sage 2008:31). The sublime has also been linked to ideas of horror or terror (Morley 2010), making the New World an overwhelming wilderness that could evoke fear. Feelings of both awe and terror that threatened to swallow the settler in the immensity of the new world, could be managed through “taming” the land, literally and metaphorically. While they engaged conceptually with the sublime, these artist were also engaged in the task of American expansion and the taming of the wild, as many of these artists were employed by the government, a government who had made Manifest Destiny a federal policy at the time. Sage notes that, “from the 1870’s onwards these artists regularly accompanied government-funded expeditions across the frontier of the United States, working alongside photographers to record these new lands for a fascinated public and Congress back east” (2008:30). These images, while overwrought with the sublime, also became a part of the rhetoric of manifest destiny and westward expansion. As Aikin explains, “Physically, politically and spiritually, we imagine ourselves moving into that landscape to occupy, settle, and own it” (2000:84). However, this occupation is predicated on the land being uninhabited unadulterated nature, an obvious fiction, but one that was both based in and supported by images of the West as pure and unadulterated (Deluca & Demo 2001).

Even when Natives are represented in paintings from American sublime landscapes or in the work of George Catlin, these images become tools of empire. George Catlin had an epiphany of sorts in 1824 upon seeing a delegation of Indians in Philadelphia: “Awestruck by their ‘classic beauty,’ the 28-year-old lawyer turned portraitist resolved to devote his life to the ‘production of a literal and graphic delineation of the living manners, customs, and character’ of the North American Indian” (John, 2001:176). Catlin visited at least 48 tribes and created approximately 500 paintings, along with detailed journals. And while Catlin believed he was engaged in sound ethnographic work,

he also, as noted earlier, called *Berdaches* or Two Spirited people “disgusting.” Monkman discusses this himself, explaining that

on the one hand [Catlin] purported to be a savior of a ‘dying race,’ but on the other hand, when he encountered things that he found distasteful, like the dance to the Berdashe², he wrote that he wanted it to be extinguished forever. I was interested in Berdashe and dandy as two characters who represent obliterated histories. For me they also represent colonized sexualities—the berdache represents the third gender, the male who inhabits the female role in aboriginal societies, and this custom was obliterated through colonial interventions. (Gooden 2009:81)

Monkman is aware of the history of Indian representation and is consciously subverting it through reappropriating one of the most famous painters of Native Americans: Catlin.

As Wrobel (2006) explains about other travel writers being engaged in the project of empire, Catlin similarly creates an object of empire, particularly in relationship to his depictions of Indians. John argues that

indeed, the American landscape and the Indian were symbols linking textually and aesthetically the natural environment and its aboriginal people to romantic notions of morality, exceptionality, and a national racial heritage. But while celebrating and promoting the Indian subject, nationalists painted a spectral picture of the Indians’ future complicit with Jacksonian policy designed to rid eastern lands of Native Americans. Catlin’s landscape paintings and descriptions problematically reproduced this irreconcilable tension in early nineteenth-century cultural nationalism and ultimately contributed to an imperial discourse on the Native American West: one that in Catlin’s works ambivalently contained its own critique, questioning the effects of west-ward expansion and Indian policy. (2001:175)

The vast expanses of unused land and the primitive and savage inhabitants justify colonialism through images like Catlin’s, enacting what John (2004) calls a “benevolent” imperialism. However, as Jacksonian Indian policy included the forced relocation of over 91,000 people, including the horrific episode known as the Trail of Tears (Satz 1975:97), it is hard to see Catlin’s work, or any image involved in manifest destiny, the American sublime, or American individualism and exceptionalism as “benevolent.”

As these American landscapes were rationales and tools of empire, it is not a stretch to see them as appropriation. These paintings both literally and metaphorically took lands away from indigenous inhabitants, either by

² *Berdashe* is another spelling of “berdache” used by Monkman.

painting them out of the paintings so that the land seemed open to new settlers or in framing the current inhabitants as either ignorant savages or children of nature, neither of which could effectively use the land the way the almighty intended it to be used. Monkman's use of both the stylistic conventions of the American sublime landscape and his reference to Catlin's work, the most famous painter of Indians, then becomes a re-appropriative gesture. Monkman symbolically reclaims North American lands by populating his depiction of them with Indians, Indians that are not naïve children of nature. Rather, Monkman's Indians are wise to the geopolitical, they understand need to conquer back, as they chase half dressed cowboys with lust in their eyes. They understand the power of the gaze, as we can see in *Study or Artist and Model* (2003) (Figure 2) This painting features dramatic lighting and the pristine forests, conventions of the American landscape painters. It also depicts Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Monkman's alter ego, in a floor length war bonnet, pink loin cloth and platform heels standing at an easel painting a "primitive" looking pattern on animal hide. To the left side of the painting, a cowboy, complete with hat, is stripped down, his pants around his ankles, tied to a tree. He is pierced by arrows, a clear reference to St. Sebastian, his penis is erect and his head is thrown back in agony, or perhaps pleasure. At his feet an old fashion plate camera, the type used by documentarians on survey missions and the later photographer Edward Curtis.

This image features the re-appropriation of the act of recording, allowing for the agency of the Indian to come through in Monkman's own image. Monkman re-appropriates the gaze, which in the works of Catlin, was an imperialist gaze that disempowered. Here, Monkman's own gaze is the narrative of the work, as he holds both violent and sexual sway over the trussed cowboy. Further more the very inclusion of himself is a re-appropriative reference to Catlin. As Liss notes

A detail not lost on Monkman was George Catlin's fondness for occasionally inserting himself into his pictures as a handsome and heroic central player. In response, Monkman created his own persona. Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle is the flamboyant, high-heeled alter ego who appears in his paintings and performances. (2005:80)

Thus the creation and following inclusion of Miss Chief is a queer re-appropriation. In looking at *Study for Artist and Model*, one sees the tools of empire have been smashed or reclaimed, the camera lays fallen and the easel now holds hide and traditional Indian imagery. The genocide of Indians is replaced by the torture of the colonial dominator, although the cowboy's clear and centrally placed erection may attest to this torture being a delicious, complicit one. Justice, et al., while discussing a different work, make a point that holds true for many of Monkman's paintings.



Figure 2. Artist and Model (2003) Acrylic on Canvas (20\"x24\")
Source: Kent Monkman

This [work] offers important ironic commentary on the sexualized history of colonialism, but it also reverses perceived power dynamics, repositioning the familiar status of Native Bodies (often those of women) as submissive victims of the colonial are erotic to assertive and enthusiastic agents of unashamed sexual subjectivity while also intimating the penetrability of white male bodies. (2010:1)

Monkman's works are far from mere mimicry, but carefully deploy a quee(re) appropriation through deft mimesis altered to challenge normativity in a multitude of ways.

Miss Chief & Performance Work

Another of Monkman's quee(re)appropriations deals directly with the birth of his alter ego Miss Chief Share Eagle Testickle and her performance pieces (Figure 3). Green argues that "One of the oldest and most pervasive forms of American cultural expression...[is] playing Indian" (1998:30). With this in mind, Monkman re-appropriates one of the oldest American cultural tropes

by playing himself, but a fictionalized Indian self. Miss Chief is a direct re-appropriation of Cher's 1973 song and performance *Half-Breed*, itself a moment of playing Indian. An obvious stereotype based on other appropriative fictions like mascots and Wild West shows, Cher's performance of sexy faux native princess becomes an image that Monkman uses and plays with in his own performances. As Vizenor explains, "...the simulation of the Indian is the absence of real natives—the contrivance of the other in the course of dominance" (1994:14). While Cher, like other users of faux Indianness like mascot enthusiasts, may believe her appropriation actually gives voice to and represents Natives, it becomes yet another tool of empire and factors into the continued dominance of indigenous people. However, by taking the image back from the hegemonic oppressors, Monkman performs a quee(re)appropriation and through his own uses challenge Western sexual binaries and attempts to bring back the traditional figure of the "*berdache*" or two-spirited figure.



Figure 3. Still from *Dance to Miss Chief* (2010) Kent Monkman 5 minute Digital video
Source: Kent Monkman

Monkman, in his bedazzled loin cloths, his “traditionally” beaded platform heels, and his sequined hot pink headdress, could be mistaken for a drag queen with a simple fixation on Cher. This would not be particularly out of the drag show norm, as Cher is a major icon in the drag community. However, Monkman’s costume and playful stage name are just the beginning, as his shows and videos eliminate any doubt that these are critical pieces of performance art. Take for instance the performance *Group of Seven Inches* (2004), the title of which is a reference to a group of Canadian landscape painters, The Group of Seven, who like the American sublime landscapist, believed that a distinctively Canadian art form could be created through an interaction with the countries expanding and unexplored wilds (Silcox 2011). Monkman’s website describes the piece as follows:

In August 2004, Group of Seven Inches was staged as an occupation of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario. In the Founder’s Lounge, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle forced innocent naked white men to become her figure models, finishing off the session by dressing the bewildered men up as more “authentic” examples of the “European male.” Miss Chief’s text borrowed heavily from the diaries of 19th century painters of “Indians,” George Catlin and Paul Kane, turning their dismissive writings on the “romantic savage” upside down and inside out. (Kent Monkman, Group of Seven Inches)

Having seen a video based on this performance, I can say that the inversion of colonial power is quite obvious since the nearly naked white men are bent over in cheesecake pinup poses for Miss Chief’s artistic eye and her occasional spanking. Liss explains the performance, noting that

...colonial roles and gender expectations are reversed, as white men (actors hired by the artist) become the subjects of ethnological study by the cross gendered Monkman/Miss chief, who arrives at the doors of the museum splendidly decked out in drag and on horseback. (2005:82)

In another piece *Séance* (2007) Miss Chief become a medium speaking with dead white colonial painters from the Orientalist Delacroix to Catlin. And with each dead artist Miss Chief channels, her own Cher like costume grows increasingly larger “...and more outlandish, as the responses of each successive artist draws more of her ire” (Monkman, *Séance*). This is a clear re- or perhaps counter, appropriation where Miss Chief literally embodies the men who stole her and her people’s image, land, and culture. Through this embodied performance she is able to speak back to the dominant colonial bodies from her own time and place in history as an inheritor of their imperial sins.

In *Justice of the Piece* (2012), Miss Chief literally holds court alluding to the long history of treaties and legal battles for sovereign land rights. In one of my personal favorites, *Mary* (2011) a short video by Kent Monkman where Miss Chief,

... stars in her first foot fetish video. Once again oozing sex and irreverence, Miss Chief revisits the Prince of Wales' visit to Montreal in 1860 to challenge the meaning of surrender within Aboriginal treaties with the crown. Referencing the biblical allegory of Mary Magdalene washing Christ's feet and linking them to the Prince of Wales' visit to Montreal in 1860, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle rewrites this historical narrative and adds a sexy twist that addresses the relationship of betrayal and treatment aboriginals have had with European colonizers. (Monkman, Mary)

The video shows Miss Chief kneeling at and licking the feet of an official figure of the British crown. However, this “boot licking” posture is laden with sadomasochistic, submissive/dominant subcultural imagery, which places the real power in the hands of the submissive, not the assumed dominant. In all of these performances, Miss Chief is an obvious queer, but also decolonial and sovereign figure whose art challenges the oppressive nature of hegemony through re-appropriations of images and practices with each platform heeled stride.

Monkman & Photography

The final production of Monkman's that I will discuss as quee(re)appropriations are his photographs. Monkman explains about his photo series *The Emergence of a Legend* (2006)

The studio portraits, shot, printed and framed to emulate antique daguerreotypes, feature my alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle in various performance guises. The photos trace the history of Aboriginal performance culture — more specifically “Indians” performing for a European audience. (Monkman, The Emergence of a Legend [1/5])

The photographs in question are a set of five images, which are all part of a limited print series. All look aged and worn, with the silver finish of antique daguerreotypes and depict Monkman in a number of dated costumes; playing “Indian” in one form or another. Monkman labels his referents specifically, explaining his identity in three of the photos as “Miss Chief as a performer in George Catlin's Gallery that toured Europe in the 1850's” (Monkman, *The Emergence of a Legend* [1/5]), “Miss Chief as The Trapper's Bride imagined as a performer in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, like a Cree Annie Oakley”

(Monkman, *The Emergence of a Legend* [5/5]), and “Miss Chief as Vaudeville performer” (Monkman, *The Emergence of a Legend* [2/5]). “After the popularity of the Wild West shows waned, many Aboriginal performers transitioned their performance careers onto the Vaudeville stage. This photo is styled closely after a photo of one Vaudeville performer, Molly Spotted Elk, who also danced in all-female revues in Paris in the 1920’s” (Monkman, *The Emergence of a Legend*, [2/5]). These are all re-appropriative performances, as all of the referents for his photos are not authentically Indian, but a performance of Indian dictated by Western conventions. Catlin, as previously discussed, was a famous portrayer of Indians, but his portrayals were created by and for European audiences. The Wild West show and Vaudeville are both notorious for depicting racist and imperialist imagery. While there has been some investigation of agency on the part of Native performers in Wild West Show, most scholars acknowledge that

Wild West shows highlighted frontier (i.e., white settler) life and included a variety of “cowboy” acts, but the stars of the show were the “Indians,” who drew in the crowds in the hundreds of thousands. Wild West shows consistently produced both romantic and stereotypical representations of Native peoples as exotic noble savages (McNenly 2014:144).

And while Banks argues convincingly that “Performance troubles oppressor/oppressed binaries” (2011:149), it is also well established that these shows, particular Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show were about, “...the frontier myth, and the making and performance of American nationalism and identity” (2011:143). Similarly, vaudeville has been the home of many stereotypes, most notably the “black face” minstrel. As Taylor and Austen note, while, “Formal minstrelsy would gradually disappear, ...the stereotypical Negro caricature that it helped etch into the nation’s psyche lingered and continued to resurface on- and offstage” (2012:xiv). Similarly, many whites have played native in films, re-enactments, and on stage (Deloria 1999), enacting a type of “Red Face.” In marking out his references in West Shows and vaudeville, Monkman demonstrates the roots of the stereotypes that he is reclaiming for his own uses.

However, the most obvious reference to Monkman’s photos, while it remains unnamed, is Edward Curtis, the famous photographer of American Indians. Working around the turn of the 20th century, Curtis’ most famous work is a twenty volume set entitled *The North American Indian* (1907-1930) which included his celebrated print, *The Vanishing Race* (1904), an image of a band of Navajos on horseback disappearing into the misty gloom. Curtis explained that the photo was meant to show, “...that the Indians as a race, already shorn of their tribal strength and stripped of their primitive dress, are passing into the darkness of an unknown future” (Dippie 1992:41). His North

American Indian project was hailed by *The New York Herald* as, “the most ambitious enterprise in publishing since the production of the King James Bible.” (King 2012: para. 1). Documenting this “fast expiring race” (Dippie 1992:42) with photography was not new (there were over one thousand daguerreotypists working in the United States by 1850) and many tropes like, “...the sentimental notion of a dying native race [was] already an entrenched literary and artistic convention” (Dippie 1992:42). Full of “rampant nostalgia,” Curtis had sought to document the “picturesque in Indian life before it disappeared forever” (Dippie 1992:42). Curtis also held a claim on the scientific, as his work was edited by a member of the Bureau of American Ethnology and was praised by American anthropologists of the day (Dippie 1992). It was this unique blend of artistic conventions and scientific appearances that made Curtis’ work so popular. Curtis’ familiarity with artistic tropes is not only visible in his work and the metaphoric description he gives it, but it can be linked to his study of Catlin’s paintings as it was an 1898 decision, “to become a photographic Catlin...seventy years after Catlin formed his own resolution to become the Indian’s memorialist” (Dippie 1992:43). Like the Hudson River Schools “imperial landscape” paintings before, these photographs were tools for surveying land and people, all in an effort to demonstrate mastery. As Aikin explains, “the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny” (2002:82) is full of surveying metaphors, compass directions, and Horace Greeley’s call, “Go west, young man” (Aikin 2000:82). These metaphors, upon and through which Curtis and others developed their conventions of representation, were more than rhetorical strategies, but were backed up by real promises of free land in the 1862 Homestead Act. Manifest destiny legitimized expansion while furthering it. This was seen not only in the allegorical depiction of Indians as vanishing from the path of white colonialism, but also in the sheer level of documentation that Curtis achieved. His project resulted in 40,000 photographs, 25,000 of which were published (Zamir 2007). While Zamir (2007) argues that to have that many images of Native people requires a certain amount of collaboration or agency on behalf of the indigenous people, however complicity with the purpose of the photos as anthropological documentations and ethnographic specimens which were to become a component of Manifest Destiny and American mythology seems unlikely. Furthermore, Mick Gidley, a renowned Curtis scholar has effectively argued that Curtis’ work is theatrical, or rather, many of Curtis’ photos were staged. Curtis’ images were made to highlight “Indian”-ness, meaning that Curtis often depicted his subjects not as they were everyday in short hair and collared shirts, but posed in headdresses and bare-chested (Zamir 2007). As Lyman (1982) explains in depth in his work *The Vanishing Race and Other Illusions*, Curtis’ work was far from objective ethnography, but rather Curtis went so far as to provide props to his subjects while claiming authenticity, placed his subjects against studio tent back drops which decontextualized them from their own

lands, and used dreamy “artistic” fin-de siècle effects like those in Curtis’ print *The Vanishing Race*. Curtis even went so far as to retouch a clock out of one of his images to further the authenticity (Lyman 1982).

For Gidley and Lyman, Curtis’ works is about “... ‘the formation and perpetuation of an iconography,’ concluding that the images must be seen as ‘re-constructions or, more accurately, constructions produced at the behest of a prevailing ideology’” (Zamir 2007:615). This construction is “the binary logic of savagism and civilization that underwrites narratives of Native demise, or vanishing, as well as the historical self-assurance of white culture” (Zamir 2007:615). This binary refuses the idea of adaptation or cultural change and freezes the Indian in a fictionalized past. Monkman is well aware of Curtis’ photography, its popularity and its fictionalized ethnography. This is something that Monkman plays with in his own work, deconstructing images that may appear authentic and pointing out both their artistically staged genesis, as well as their role in the subjugation of Native peoples as savages from the past. While Zamir (2007) may believe that there is more Indian agency in Curtis’ images than meets the eye, Monkman offers a truly sovereign Indian image that addresses both complicity and rejection. Monkman’s decolonizing projects are executed in the visual language of the colonizer, but re-appropriate the image of the Indian for use by a contemporary, urban, indigene.

Conclusions

Art, whether in the realm of fine art, the arena of public art, or as cultural production gathered into anthropological and cultural museums, has been used as a tool of empire. While contemporary art often has connotations of radical and leftist politics, this is a recent association. Traditionally, museums housed the acquisitions of empire and acted as warehouses of hegemonic colonial power, where the conqueror displayed the artifacts of conquered as a way to demonstrate, even consolidate, their own nationalism and sovereign power. These objects and images were misappropriations, as they were decontextualized on the shelves of museums and displayed as the hegemonic order saw fit, not as the original creators intended. These artifacts were often gathered or created by those who believe they were preserving vanishing cultures, even defending indigenous people from the inevitable expansion of empire. However, figures like Catlin and Watkins, while enacting what has been called “benevolent imperialism”, were still culpable for involvement in the atrocities of colonialism. And it is the long history of placing indigenous people in museum settings that freeze them as dying or dead cultures from the past that has drawn so many native artists like Kent Monkman to engage with these misappropriated images.

What this article offers is two pronged: first a strategy to approach works like Monkman’s through quee(re)appropriation. It has been noted that

gender and sovereignty are co-constitutive because sovereignty is about embodied-being in the traditional tribal ways. It is through this that Two Spiritedness, or an indigenous understanding of gender and sexuality, becomes a sovereign erotics and a decolonial gesture. Similarly, quee(re)appropriation joins queer critiques of heteronormativity with the act of re-appropriation, creating a similarly co-constitutive relationship. Secondly, the application of quee(re)appropriation as an analytic to the work of Kent Monkman allows for a deep investigation of themes like Two Spiritedness, re-appropriation as a decolonizing strategy, and sovereign artistic statements. While cloaked in humor and camp, Monkman makes complex statements about colonialism and assimilation that invert and complicate traditional narratives of aggressor and victim, settler and savage, colonizer and colonized. Monkman's work plays with the gray areas between these binaries through humor and erotic pleasure and makes sovereign, self-determined artistic statements about himself and the lived experience of contemporary Indians.

The effectiveness of much of Monkman's work hinges on his knowledge of Western canon and his reappropriation not only of images of Indians and images of native lands, but through his counter-appropriation of the aesthetic styles and strategies of empire. Monkman's work may look like mimicry, but speaking the enemy's language is actually a way to speak back to power. By using Western tropes, Monkman avoids an out and out rejection of the work and lures viewers in through familiar images of the splendor of manifest destiny. It is only on closer examination that the layers of re-appropriation and counter appropriation reveal themselves through homosexual encounters and gender queer performances. Two Spirited being, in both its sexual liminality, as well as its racial and cultural components, can be shocking to Western sensibilities, which may be broadening in regards to what is acceptable, but are still incredibly white and heteronormative. If Two Spiritedness were not stylized in the aesthetics of colonialism, the work may not be as successful, as the viewer could simply reject it. Instead Monkman's work becomes uncanny, luring the viewer in through the familiar, and then discomforting with the foreign. The work creates for the viewer a feeling that is all too familiar to the colonized subject, that of being foreign in one's own land and skin. While Monkman's works may appear mimetic, through quee(re)appropriation the works transcend their stylistic lineage opening up a space of resistant ambiguity that challenges the dominant racist heterosexist patriarchy. Monkman's works become sovereign art statements that emphasize contemporary native agency: a contemporary native agency in beaded platform heels.

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